

Turning health research into health gains

MEDIA RELEASE

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Research that will equitably improve some of New Zealand's most pressing health issues, including cancer, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, was showcased this week.

The Healthier Lives–He Oranga Hauora National Science Challenge brought together top international and New Zealand researchers for **Kōrero Tahi 2024: equity and beyond**, held at Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.

Healthier Lives Director, Professor Sir Jim Mann, outlined the significance of this event.

“Our research programmes target the prevention and treatment of diseases that cause much of the ill health that people experience here in Aotearoa New Zealand”.

“But importantly, the work of Healthier Lives represents a new way of doing research, and includes everything from co-design of health programmes with communities to how research is implemented by health providers,” says Professor Mann.

Visiting international researcher Professor Nick Wareham, from the University of Cambridge, shared a surprisingly simple and effective way to help prevent type 2 diabetes, which is at epidemic proportions, both here, and in the UK.

“The evidence shows that making small changes to our physical activity can make a big difference to the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Doing a bit more exercise each day, such as walking for 20mins, can make this difference,” says Professor Mann.

Emerging results from the first New Zealand trial of the DiRECT programme for the remission of type 2 diabetes were presented. All indications so far suggest that this weight loss approach to stopping type 2 diabetes in its tracks will have major benefits for those living with type 2 diabetes in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Researchers also highlighted new technologies that can help diagnose and monitor cancer treatment. Professor Mann explains:

“New Zealand researchers have been investigating circulating tumour DNA, or ctDNA, for monitoring cancer treatment - this can be done using a simple blood test.”

“These tests allow early detection of changes in response to cancer treatment, which means that alterations to treatment can be initiated quickly.”

“This is especially important for people who don’t live close to a major hospital. And it looks like ctDNA can pick up changes in cancer growth earlier than imaging can.”

Professor Mann hopes that New Zealand will follow the lead from other countries and include ctDNA technology in cancer treatment programmes, especially as it appears to be cost neutral.

Another new initiative featured at the event was the Healthier Lives implementation network, the first such mechanism developed in New Zealand to facilitate successful community health programmes to be used more widely.

“Healthier Lives, and other New Zealand research teams, have developed a wealth of community-led health programmes that we know can reduce the risk of developing things like heart disease and type 2 diabetes,” says Professor Mann.

“Until now, there hasn’t been a mechanism to help communities hear about these programmes, and to adapt them for their own needs.”

“This implementation network could be a game changer, particularly for Māori and Pacific communities to be able to implement health programmes that work for them. But to be successful, it needs to be supported”.

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